INFLUENCES ON DRYDEN'S PROSE STYLE

BY

MILDRED ALICE MARTIN

A.B., University of Illinois, 1929

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
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INFLUENCES ON DRYDEN'S PROSE STYLE

Although much has been said, casually, about influences on Dryden's prose style, and although the history of the development of prose style in the seventeenth century has in the past twenty-five years become fairly well-known, there has been little attempt to relate Dryden's prose style to the movement for simplification and clarification. The three pages of W. P. Ker's introduction to Dryden's *Essays* (1899) remain the best study of the relation between Dryden's prose style and its sources.

The purpose of this study was not so much to discover a new set of influences at work to produce Dryden's prose, as to define more exactly than has been done his relation to the influences already accepted as having been important in the seventeenth century, namely, Cartesian rationalism, French *mondanité,* the revolt against enthusiasm, and the need of a new prose to meet the demands of the scientific report. The method pursued has been to divide Dryden's prose into the following stylistic elements: the whole composition, the sentence, diction, and figures of speech, and to seek in authors, genres, and philosophical thought the influences upon these formal stylistic elements. Elements of Dryden's own personality have been noticed as they selected and recombined the influences presented to him by the age.

But before a direct comparison of Dryden's style and that of others is undertaken, it is necessary to decide whether or not Dryden's prose style changed between 1664, the date of the Dedication to the *Rival Ladies,* and 1700, when the *Preface to the Fables* appeared. The decision on this point will provide a terminal date for the investigation, as the beginning of the seventeenth century provides the date for starting the investigation.

From a study of the evolution of Dryden's poetic style up to 1666, of his stylistic theories, and of his practice in the use of figures of speech and of his sentence structure, I have concluded that there was no significant change in his style between 1664 and 1700. His poetic development, marked by the gradual elimination of the decadent conceit, greater smoothness and fluency of sentence structure, and reduction in the use of classical and recondite learning, shows that the influences which we call "neo-

classical" were affecting Dryden in the years for which we have no prose from his pen. His stylistic theory remained surprisingly consistent throughout his career, except on these points: a growing disapproval of conceits and of the use of technical terms, and an inclination to define wit as *propriety* rather than as *sharpness of conceit.* But even here, where there seems to be change in Dryden's stylistic ideas, there is no corresponding change in his practice, which always, in prose, avoided the conceit and the use of technical terms, and sought both propriety and sharpness of conceit. The one change in practice, and a change to which too much attention has been given, is the shortening of his sentences. Although in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* only 12.3 per cent of Dryden's sentences were less than 20 words in length, whereas in his latest essay, the *Preface to the Fables,* 19.6 per cent of his sentences were less than 20 words in length, this fact is of less importance than it is sometimes said to be. The psychological effect of a sentence upon the reader is not so much dependent upon its length as upon its structure. A long sentence consisting of six independent predications which afford five temporary resting places for the reader before he comes to the final period, requires less sustained mental energy to grasp than does a shorter sentence the parts of which are all dependent upon one another. A long sentence of several independent members gives the effect of a paragraph of short, coherent sentences rather than of a single sentence. The Ciceronian sentence, such as that used by Hooker, in which all the parts support and involve one another, though it may be longer than one of Dryden's sentences, makes a greater demand on the attention of the reader, and this is more important in its psychological effect than sentence length alone. Dryden did not alter the structure of his sentences as time went on; he merely substituted periods for semicolons and colons. It is valid, then, to say that there was no significant change in Dryden's prose style between 1664 and his death, and we may limit our search for influences to the time before 1664.

Dryden's natural tendency in the organization of the whole composition was toward digression from his main theme. He very evidently had no outline when he sat down to write, and when a series of thoughts allied to his main subject, but not

strictly a part of it, occurred to him, he did not reject it. These digressions and shifts of subject matter occur in almost all of his critical writing, with the notable exception of the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy,* and in his biographies and controversial writing. But they do not occur in ten of his dedications, which are devoted wholly to flattery of his patron, and gratitude for favors received and to come. The reason for this surprising unity in the "pure" dedications is that all but two of them are accompanied by prefaces which discuss the history of the play, attack stupid critics, contain digressions on the superiority of a retired life, or a defence of the morals of the author. Dryden's division of labor between the dedication and preface was probably suggested to him by La Mesnardière, Corneille, Sarasin, and Scudéry.

Dryden's six pieces of controversy are unlike the rest of his prose in their lack of urbanity. His lack of organization, not merely digression, but frequent incoherence, repetition of idea, and lack of clear guiding purpose, is caused partly by anger, as in the attack on Settle, partly by unfamiliarity with the subject, as in *A Defence of the Paper Written by the Duchess of York,* but most of all by the fact that Dryden is following the traditional form of controversial prose, which was, as Krapp describes it, "first to state or quote, point by point, the specific opinions of your opponent, following each point by its refutation."[1] In following this method of controversy, Dryden is more old-fashioned than Tillotson, from whom he once said, too generously, that he had learned all that he knew of English prose. He could have learned from Tillotson both how to organize controversial writing, and how to keep his serenity of temper when arguing, but he did not.

There are insets in the web of Dryden's critical writing which also inherit from the older forms, this time from the character and the disputation. Dryden modifies both of these, however, in response to his purpose and temper. The characters are more like Jonson's characters of Bacon and Shakespeare than like the characters of types such as those of Overbury and Earle.

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[1] Krapp, G. P., *The Rise of English Literary Prose,* Oxford University Press (1915) p. 129

There are only four of these in Dryden's prose, though *Absalom and Achitophel* contains a series of brilliant ones. More frequent are the passages of closely-reasoned argument, using the language of formal logic, and reminiscent of the university disputation. Although he rejected logic as a source for figures of speech, in accordance with the stylistic program of the Royal Society, and although he rejected also the Aristotelian modes of reasoning in favor of the Cartesian, he delighted in the framework of the school debate, humanizing it by his wit, good manners, and ease of expression.

The most important of the genres used by Dryden is, of course, criticism, in which we see more clearly than elsewhere what is meant by the oft-repeated statement that Dryden is a representative figure of his age, and that he also preserves an individuality which expresses itself in a style its own, while yet typical of the age. In him, the ideal of the *honnête homme,* with all that it implied of gentlemanly negligence, avoidance of pedantry, and adornment of well-mannered wit, met the other ideal of philosophical rationalism, which emphasized method, order, and reason. For the most part these ideals worked toward a common end, but sometimes they clashed, as in the Cartesian love of order and the gentlemanly ideal of negligence. Dryden apparently had an innate love of order, which was strengthened by Cartesian emphasis on method, by his reading in the well-organized sermons of Sanderson and Tillotson, and in such French critics as La Mesnardière and Corneille. But he also liked to write rapidly, and he disliked to plan a composition in detail before he began to write. He found sanction for this latter tendency in the doctrine of the gentleman, a theory native to England, but which came to Dryden most strongly through the practice and theory of Montaigne. Although Montaigne fell into passing disfavor in France about 1660, his popularity in England not only maintained itself, but even increased. Among French objections was the absence of regular composition in the *Essais,* an irregularity which shocked the taste of those who favored classicism. But in England, and especially for John Dryden, such irregularity pleased. We know that he had long admired Montaigne, and in the last year of his life he said that he had learned from the practice of "honest Montaigne" that it was in

the nature of a preface to be rambling, never wholly in the way nor wholly out of it. I do not mean to imply that Dryden learned how to avoid the appearance of too great regularity from Montaigne, but he found in him authority for the easy, informal manner of writing, a manner which suited one aspect of his temperament. Good writing was to be an imitation of the conversation of the wits, spontaneous, easy, and flexible. Dryden effected a compromise between his need for digression and the opposing need for regularity by calling attention to his digressions, sometimes more elaborately than is necessary. But one genre, by its very form, enabled him to produce an excellently-unified and at the same time graceful and easy composition; I refer, of course, to the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*. Dryden might have said of this, as he did of *All for Love*, that it was the only thing which he had written for himself.

The gentlemanly ideal had less direct effect upon sentence structure, although it reduces, in the interest of elegance, the swelling quality of some of the earlier prose. It avoids also the curt or epigrammatic sentence. But the sentence patterns which Dryden was to write with distinction certainly existed in earlier prose. He invented nothing, as Saintsbury said. In so far as Jacobean and Commonwealth prose is represented by Browne's *Religio Medici*, and the last chapter in *Urn Burial*, by Burton's *Anatomy*, by Jeremy Taylor's passage on the shortness of life in *Holy Dying*, and by Milton's *Areopagitica*, that is, by its poetic prose, that prose is not in the tradition which is to include Dryden. I suggest that although these passages form the glory and peculiar excellence of earlier seventeenth-century prose, they are not typical of that prose. They represent the unique quality of that baroque and metaphysical period, and we inevitably turn to Browne's contemplations on the shortness of life and on diuturnity, and to Burton's "Digression of Air," when we want the best prose expression of the age. But we forget, in our delight, that the age had another style at its command, a style already partially fit to explain, soberly or vigorously, ideas of literary criticism, as in Bacon and Jonson, to explain ancient burial customs or vulgar errors, as Browne does, or any other work-a-day, reasoned ideas. The Jacobean and Commonwealth authors used two prevailing sentence patterns in their explana-

tions, to which M. W. Croll has given the useful names of curt and loose. Dryden almost never employed the curt style in its ideal form, that is, to produce epigram or aphorism, an effect at which many of the earlier writers aimed. But he did take over and make his own the other sentence pattern, the loose. The loose sentence is typically punctuated by colons and semicolons, which require a greater mental hop between parts than does the Ciceronian sentence. The short, non-epigrammatic, or normal sentence, another of Dryden's favorites, offers no problem for its ancestry, for it is found in all the preceding writers, even in Hooker, who is sometimes discussed as if he never wrote a sentence of less than a hundred words.

We have not remembered the plainer sentences of Taylor, Browne, Fuller, and Bacon, and have regarded the sentences of Jonson as exceptional, because they have been overshadowed by the magnificent sentences of another kind, born of another mood. A further reason for our mistaken separation of the Dryden sentence from the earlier one is the difference of diction and figures of speech, a difference so real and so striking that we are apt to be misled by it into thinking that there is also a difference in sentence structure.

It is in his choice of words and figures that we see the most marked effects of the ideals of rationalism and of the *honnête homme,* for here they cooperate instead of being partially antagonistic, as in the organization of the whole composition. Dryden feels, with Hobbes, Sprat, the "plain" preachers, and a long line of critics of rhetoric as the ally of passion, that an appeal to the emotions is dangerous. This leads him to strip his language of connotation, to define his terms, to strive for, and achieve, a crisp firmness of outline rather than the golden aura which surrounds the words of Donne and Browne. One reads Dryden in the confidence that everywhere he will meet with vigor, clarity, adequacy, and that he will not be tempted to linger over some grand or haunting figure like that of Browne: "But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy," or Donne's "The sun at noon." Dryden's is a prose of reason; he did not aim at the effects of those who went before him. There are no purple passages in Dryden, unless it be the opening of the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or the passage on Chaucer from the *Preface*

to the Fables. But the prose of Dryden does not suggest, really, purple or any other color; it suggests, rather, a clear white light. And that is his distinction. He wrote everywhere at a high level. One despairs of paraphrasing him, as of imitating him.

The most striking difference between Dryden's prose and that of the Frenchmen with whom he is often compared is his large number of figures of speech. For Dryden, the ideal of urbanity, or "well-mannered wit," kept him from going to the extreme of the "bare, naked" language used by Corneille, and advocated in England by Sprat and Hobbes. He will use figures, but only those drawn from the interests and occupations of upper-class English life. Even there he is careful to exhibit no technical knowledge unbecoming a friend of Dorset and Sedley and a collaborator of King Charles. He draws figures of speech from the law, but does not sound like an advocate, and from medicine, but does not sound like a physician. He is the English country gentleman in his talk of pruning and sowing and reaping. His demand for clarity as the first of the intellectual virtues, in which he is at one with his age, kept him from drawing upon the sciences of the mind—logic, metaphysics, and grammar—for his figures.

He depends upon the obvious, and upon the ordinary, though happy, figures rather than on the intellectual, recondite, and surprising ones typical of the prose of the Jacobean and Commonwealth periods. Instead of saying, as when we read Browne and Donne, "How beautiful, and how strange!", we say, when Dryden speaks of swimming beyond his depth in attempting to praise Orrery's statesmanship, "How appropriate, and how natural." He frequently repeats the same figures from essay to essay, with slight change. And often this favorite figure of his has been consecrated by the use of prose writers before him. He uses, for example, figures drawn from the comparison between poetry and painting no less than thirty-four times; it was a commonplace of aesthetics in the reign of Charles II that poetry, painting, and music were allied. I have found figures drawn from this source in Jonson, Temple, and Wolseley.

Although Dryden found no model of prose which he could imitate as a whole, in Ben Jonson he found a "pure and neat language" akin to his own, in Scudéry and Sarasin a graceful

arrangement of the whole composition, and in Tillotson and Cowley a tone of well-bred ease. These men, and others, helped Dryden to formulate the ideal of gentlemanly writing, as Descartes, Hobbes, and Sprat helped him to formulate the ideal of neo-classical order and the elevation of reason over emotion. The result of the happy combination of these forces impinging upon a personality fitted to receive them was the production of the "other harmony of prose."

VITA

Mildred Alice Martin was born July 9, 1904, near Arthur, Illinois, where she received her early schooling. She was graduated from the University of Illinois in 1929, with High Honors in English. She became an Assistant in the Department of English in 1929, and received her A.M. degree in 1931. In the summer of 1936 she studied at the Huntington Library, and she read in the Bodleian in the summer of 1938. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa.